Candlelight
Dec. 24, 1983
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Alone among all the creatures, the eagle has the ability to look firectly into the sun and not be dazzled. The ancient world knew that, somehow. Modern naturalists have confirmed it. The eagle is not blinded by gazing directly into the intense solar brightness ~~of the sun~~.

On this night when it is customary to think about sheep and cattle and humble donkeys, I should like to add the eagle to the collection and this is why.

The eagle can look directly into the light with its uncanny, penetrating gaze. The eagle - from the earliest days of the church - has been the symbol of the ~~Gospel According to John~~ Fourth Gospel. ~~The Gospel~~ And the Gospel account begins, not with a story about human birth, but with these words . .

> "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God.. . In him was life and the life was th e light of all people . The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

That's a little like looking directly into the sun. Others told the story beautifully: a story about a young woman, barely bethrothed, suddenly and ~~mysteriously~~ unexplainedly pregnant: an unlikely birth in an unlikely place: a story about angels and shepherds tending their flocks and three mysterious kings from the east following their astrological calculations about a dramatically bright star to Bethlehem in Judea. The story could not be improved upon. When John wrote his Gospel, at least a half-centry had elasped and it was time to look intensley, directly, with the penetrating gaze of the eagle.

He chose vivid ~~literary~~ images, which Biblical writwers before

him had employed. While the myth-makers of ancient religion projected fantasies of wars between the gods, and bizarre fertility rites, the ancient semite who wrote out of his people's experience with a faithful and loving God put it this way . .

> "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was without from and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep. And God said, "Let there be light." And there was light."

As they reflected on their experience, these people who knew themselves chosen turned again and again to the same images to describe life apart from God and to describe what transpires whn God is present.

> The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined."

We know, the power and timeless relevance of those images. We are reminded that the human race observed the lenghtening shadows od December with deep forboding for millenia, wondering, annually, about the teturbn of the light.

We know that darkness is an apt representation of the part of the story psychology calls the shadow side.

And we know, each of us, the personal manifestations of darkness: of disappointment; of personal loss and subsequent grief; of separation and the subsequent pain of loneliness; of depression and near despair. We know - each of us - at a level beneath the surface of our lives, that the timeless battle between light and darkness continues.

There is something about darkness that makes a single light more radiant. And there is something about the birth of Jesus which is more visible in the darkness. It is not merely the romance and warmth of candlelight. It is, rather, our experience that when God makes his presence known in history, or in the modest confines of our own lives, it is like light. It is not nostalgia, or even the quiet beauty of our ~~mingled candlelight~~ candlelight mingled to lighten this sanctuary - although it is certainly that. It is our sense that when God comes into our lives it will be experienced as love, healing, peace, and the strong ~~reminiscence~~ rebirth of hope,.

The eagle - with unblinking intensity gazes directly into the sun. . . "In the beginning was the word . . . In him was life and the life was the light of all . . . the light shines in the darkness."

It is God's light. It is December light. It is light which becomes as vulnerable as love. It is light as fragile and gentle as the light of a candle.

And suddenly, for those who can sustain their gaze at the light, there is life ~~XXX~~ even in the midst of death, and there is hope even in the midst of despair; and in the darkest, coldest night there is joy and laughter and singing and great ~~XXXXX~~ beauty.

In the darkness of a stable behind a Bethlehem ~~XXXX~~ Inn, Jesus Christ was born. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.